CHAPTER 1

Sowing the Seeds
From the Abyssinia Crisis to the Armistice

Reporting on the state of relations between Berlin and Rome and the implications for French foreign policy in late April 1939, André François-Poncet concluded that: 'The German has little regard for his ally; he suspects him of remaining ready to betray him. The Italian complains about the air of superiority with which his associate regards him. He attributes that to a desire for domination and hegemony'.[1] As ambassador to Italy and former ambassador to Germany, François-Poncet's analysis was at once insightful and deceptive. On the one hand, he shrewdly gauged the tensions between the two governments; on the other hand, however, he overstated their significance.

This chapter suggests that two key dimensions of French policy towards Italy before July 1940 presaged that which was developed by Vichy in the period thereafter. The first was an underestimation of the significance of ideology in driving Mussolini's actions. The second was an overestimation of the French ability to control and manipulate the Italian government. The two strands led inexorably and erroneously to a belief that the French government might be able to drive a wedge between Mussolini and Hitler and that the former might be induced to act as a moderating force on the latter. Although Vichy saw itself as heralding a rupture with the Third Republic, many of its chief foreign policy protagonists spanned both periods. Key figures within the government, including Marshal Philippe Pétain, Pierre Laval, Etienne Flandin and Paul Baudouin, had had experience in international affairs before the war. Significantly, as foreign minister in the 1930s, Laval had made a name for himself as the architect of French rapprochement with Italy. Many of the country's leading diplomats remained in post under Vichy as well. On the Italian side, there was still greater continuity; those who shaped Italy's foreign policy, including

[1] André François-Poncet, *Au Palais Farnèse. Souvenirs d'une Ambassade à Rome 1938–1940* (Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1961), pp. 103–4.

Mussolini, Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano and Marshal Badoglio, scarcely altered their views of France before and after the establishment of the Vichy government.

In the years leading up to the war, Franco-Italian relations underwent significant swings from closeness in the face of the German threat to rupture and fragile fluidity following the Abyssinia crisis. Despite Italy having fought alongside France during the First World War, its transformation into a Fascist state, the tensions over the Versailles peace terms and the ongoing disputes over Tunisia meant that if the Quai d'Orsay recognised its significance as a counterbalance to Germany, it remained imbued with 'systematic Italophobia'.[2] Only the need to respond to changing circumstances and the growing threat from Hitler changed diplomats' perspectives. In 1935, France signed an important set of political and military accords with Italy which it hoped would create a counterweight to Germany and Britain. However, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935 brought a new, antagonistic tone to the relationship. Thereafter, Fascist foreign policy became increasingly driven by ideology. The regime's divisions with the western democratic powers grew ever sharper as it drew closer into the Nazi orbit. Nevertheless, within the Italian government and army, views on France remained split. Under the leadership of Marshal Badoglio, Italian military commanders maintained contact with their French counterparts and continued to regard Germany as the common enemy as late as 1939.[3] Within the government, Ciano and former foreign minister Dino Grandi contested Mussolini's approach towards France as well. Ultimately, however, despite wielding significant influence, Ciano's control over the direction of foreign policy was limited and Mussolini invariably prevailed.[4] By the time the French government came to seek negotiations to avert war, Mussolini's views on France had become so soured as to preclude any talks and any real prospect of cooperation after the armistice.

This chapter begins by examining how the fallout over the Abyssinia crisis left an indelible mark on Franco-Italian relations, shaping Mussolini's perceptions of the French government and weakening Laval's influence in Rome for the duration of the war. It then explores how Mussolini's ideological ambitions brought growing rifts between Paris and Rome

[2] Pierre Guillen, 'Franco-Italian Relations in Flux, 1918–1940', in Robert Boyce (ed.), *French Foreign and Defence Policy, 1918–1940: Decline and Fall of a Great Power* (London: LSE/Routledge, 1998), p. 150.
[3] Shorrock, *From Ally to Enemy*, p. 273.
[4] Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 47; Strang, *On the Fiery March*, p. 13.

as European tensions mounted. The final section analyses how French responses to the Italian entry into the war and the armistice terms laid the foundations for Vichy's treatment of the Axis.

The Depreciation of Laval

As the main architect of the Franco-Italian accords signed in 1935, Laval might have seemed the best-placed French politician to appeal to Mussolini and prevent Italian belligerence when the hour came in 1940. Indeed, Laval believed that he alone could have brought about such an outcome.[5] In reality, however, the Abyssinia crisis significantly depreciated Laval's value as an asset in Franco-Italian relations. Far from being respected in Italian political circles, he was held in contempt, given a wide berth by Italian diplomats and dismissed as a 'parliamentarian'.[6] Laval's approach towards Italy was based less on any sense of cultural or historical affinity than strategic calculations about the position of France in an increasingly tense Europe. Ideology was not his primary concern either. Before the outbreak of the war, he was more alarmed by the threat posed by German domination than the threat from Communism.

On becoming foreign minister in October 1934 and then prime minister in June 1935, the growing danger presented by Nazi Germany led Laval to prioritise attempts to secure rapprochement with Italy. Yet, despite claiming to the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on 16 March 1938 that it was his life's mission to secure an agreement between France and Italy as 'Latin cousins', Laval's interest in Italy was only ever pragmatic.[7] With Hitler making good on his promises to revise the peace terms of 1919 and to reassert Germany's position in Europe, despite its scepticism, the Quai d'Orsay began to pave the way for a future agreement between France and Italy, cultivating favourable French public opinion towards the neighbouring state through a series of political and cultural initiatives.[8] With Mussolini's regime unleashing a wave of hostile propaganda, officials needed to reassure the French people and to win over those on the centre right who were concerned about dealing with a Fascist power. Officials, therefore, emphasised

[5] Geoffrey Warner, *Pierre Laval and the Eclipse of France* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), pp. 165–6.
[6] Guariglia to Ciano, 24 May 1940, DDI, IX, vol. 4, p. 439.
[7] Warner, *Pierre Laval*, pp. 140, 144.
[8] On the attempts to develop cultural ties between France and Italy during this period, see Catherine Fraixe, Lucia Piccioni and Christophe Poupault (eds.), *Vers une Europe latine. Acteurs et enjeux des échanges culturels entre la France et l'Italie fasciste* (Bruxelles: PIE Peter Lang, 2014).

the countries' shared Latin culture, Catholicism and experiences in fighting alongside one another in the First World War, creating a narrative of solidarity between the two states that went far beyond Laval's pragmatism.

The accords signed between Laval and Mussolini in January 1935 sought to resolve areas of tension between the two countries as well as to bring cooperation in areas of shared interest. The agreement included terms relating to the German threat to the independence of Austria and German rearmament, as well as clauses involving the French cession of territory at the southern Libyan border and in Eritrea. Most significantly, however, in return for Mussolini yielding ground on the contested issue of the rights of Italians in Tunisia, Laval agreed to a set of secret protocols granting major concessions to Italy on Abyssinia. The January accords paved the way for further agreements. Under the terms of a military pact signed in June 1935, the two governments resolved to engage in close cooperation and military support in the event of German mobilisation against France or of a disturbance between Austria and Germany.[9]

The Italian invasion of Abyssinia on 2 October 1935 and the subsequent international uproar changed everything. Nevertheless, Laval was determined to ride the storm and uphold the French position. As an important new ally and a Locarno signatory, the French government's belief that Italy represented a useful counter to a rising threat from Germany remained unchanged. It also made military sense not to break with Italy. On 3 October, Chief of Staff General Gamelin warned that in the case of a future war against Germany, not having to confront Italian forces was worth seventeen divisions to the French army. If French forces had to prepare to defend North Africa and the Alps against a possible Italian invasion at the same time as facing a German assault, they would find themselves stretched and vulnerable.[10] In a secret deal with the British Foreign Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare on 7–8 December 1935, Laval, therefore, pushed through an agreement that effectively conceded Italian rule over most of Abyssinia. When the deal was leaked to the press, however, the international scandal forced Laval to resign from office in January 1936.

Above all, however, it was Mussolini's response to the Abyssinia crisis that irredeemably embittered relations between the two states. The precise detail of what Laval had agreed with Mussolini, when the two met in January 1935, was unclear because the talks were conducted in private with

[9] Anthony Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 33.
[10] Ibid, p. 34.

no written record. Mussolini came away from the meeting convinced that Laval had agreed to give Italy a free hand in Abyssinia and that France would turn a blind eye to Italian actions, whereas Laval maintained that he had not made any such promise.[11] There might have been a genuine misunderstanding or there might have been some element of duplicity on the part of one or both of the interlocutors; but in the subsequent fallout, Mussolini came to view the actions of Laval and the French government as treachery. The final blow to Franco-Italian rapprochement came from the Popular Front government which was elected on an anti-Fascist platform in June 1936. Its introduction of sanctions against Italy on 19 June 1936, followed by its decision to recall its ambassador in October 1936 and tensions over the Spanish Civil War, brought relations to a new low.

Growing Rifts

Even before the Spanish Civil War, however, Mussolini's foreign policy had become increasingly ideological in character. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia heralded a major shift in the domestic and external orientation of the Fascist regime.[12] Powered by social Darwinist notions of race, the expansionism that lay at the heart of Mussolini's vision combined with a fresh emphasis on the values of war and violence.[13] Inaugurating an ideologically driven 'Fascist decade of war', the Abyssinia crisis gave rise to a new international landscape that was to have grave consequences not just for France but also for Europe and the wider world.[14] Mussolini's desire to escape the 'imprisonment' of the Mediterranean, advancing Fascist domination into North Africa and the Middle East and remodelling Italy into an imperial power, threatened the colonial interests of the western democracies.[15] Nevertheless, even though the pursuit of such goals brought

[11] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat: The Collapse of French Diplomacy, 1932–39*, trans. Catherine E. Dop and Robert L. Miller (New York: Enigma Books, 2004), p. 94.

[12] See Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922–1940* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Robert Mallett, *Mussolini in Ethiopia: The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War, 1919–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935–1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2005); G. Bruce Strang (ed.), *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and Its International Impact* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[13] Strang, *On the Fiery March*, pp. 28–31.

[14] Marco Maria Aterrano and Karine Varley, 'Introduction: A Fascist Decade of War? The Impact of the Italian Wars on the International Stage, 1935–45', in Marco Maria Aterrano and Karine Varley (eds.), *A Fascist Decade of War: 1935–1945 in International Perspective* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–10.

[15] Simon Ball, *The Bitter Sea: The Struggle for Mastery in the Mediterranean, 1935–1949* (London: Harper Press, 2009), p. 10; Alexander De Grand, 'Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935–1940', *Contemporary European History* 13:2 (2004), 127–47; MacGregor Knox, *Common*

Mussolini closer to Hitler, Fascist ideology did not make an alliance between Rome and Berlin inevitable. The set of protocols that became known as the Rome–Berlin Axis signed on 25 October 1936 represented a clear signal of Mussolini's intentions but was not yet a full alliance.

Confronted with the new international environment, French military planners warned that they did not have the resources to deal with threats in the Mediterranean and Europe at the same time. In early February 1938, Gamelin issued a report arguing that with the Mediterranean being a vital connecting route to both the French and British colonial empires, it was Italy, rather than Germany, that represented the most immediate danger to the country's security.[16] When the Popular Front collapsed two months later, Georges Bonnet, therefore, sought to repair damaged relations with Italy. The French government's decision in early October 1938 to send an ambassador to Rome after two years without diplomatic representation represented a significant conciliatory gesture. The appointment of André François-Poncet, one of the country's most senior diplomats, was intended to send a signal of the importance Paris attached to restoring relations with Rome. However, when he arrived in Italy on 7 November 1938, François-Poncet was met with a frosty reception.[17] Matters came to a head when he visited the Chamber of Deputies on 30 November 1938. Ciano was in the midst of a relatively mundane speech when he mentioned Italy's 'natural aspirations'. Suddenly, around fifteen Fascist deputies shouted 'Nice, Savoie, Corsica, Tunisia'. In the weeks that followed, the Fascist press subjected François-Poncet to daily diatribes of 'extraordinary virulence, hatred and vulgarity', which left him 'stupefied'.[18]

Having already determined to toughen his stance after the Sudeten crisis two months earlier, Daladier responded to the provocation by publicly signalling that appeasement was over. Touring Corsica and North Africa to popular acclaim in early 1939, Daladier sought to reassure the territories in question that they would not become France's Sudetenland. As he addressed crowds in Algiers on 6 January 1939, he vowed not to cede so much as an acre of French territory.[19] Nevertheless, French officials sought to maintain diplomatic channels with the Italians as 'vacillating

Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 146; Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933–1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 5.

[16] Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming*, pp. 227–9.

[17] François-Poncet, *Au Palais Farnèse*, pp. 10–16.

[18] Ibid, pp. 38–9.

[19] AD Papiers Rochat 19, 'Daladier à Alger', 6 January 1939. See also Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 90–1.

and uncertain friends'.[20] Moreover, despite his uncompromising public position, in early February 1939, Daladier agreed to send Paul Baudouin as an unofficial emissary to Rome. As director-general of the Bank of Indochina, Baudouin's involvement in the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway had led him to establish contacts with senior Italian government figures, including Ciano. He was, therefore, instructed to convey the message that while the French government would not cede any territory, it was willing to engage in negotiations. The mission was so secretive that even François-Poncet was not informed, only finding out by chance when he happened to spot Baudouin at the railway station in Rome. However, the initiative collapsed when news of Baudouin's trip was leaked to the press on 9 February. Newspapers rounded on the government, accusing it of returning to the kind of discredited back-door diplomacy that had resulted in the Munich agreement.[21]

Over the course of 1939, ministers and diplomats oscillated between believing that rapprochement with Mussolini was desirable and achievable and believing that it was hopeless and in vain.[22] Many French officials continued to believe that Mussolini was a moderating influence upon Hitler who had played a decisive role in bringing the German dictator to the negotiating table at Munich in September 1938.[23] They failed to appreciate that this was simply Mussolini's way of reasserting his usefulness to Hitler.[24] They also failed to pay sufficient heed to Mussolini's pronouncement to the Fascist Grand Council in early February 1939. Described by G. Bruce Strang as Mussolini's equivalent to *Mein Kampf*, the speech outlined a vision of Fascist foreign policy that called on Italy to take the French Alps, Corsica and Tunisia and to break free from its 'Mediterranean prison'.[25] Only François-Poncet seemed to understand the ideological imperatives behind Mussolini's position, informing the Quai d'Orsay that Italian neutrality could only ever be temporary because the whole aim and trajectory of the regime was directed to war. Condemning Baudouin's secret mission as having worsened Italian demands, François-Poncet warned that Mussolini was only interested in securing total victory over France. By

[20] Phipps to Halifax, 19 December 1938, DBFP, ser. 3, vol. 3, pp. 479–88; AD Papiers Rochat 19, Bonnet, Chambre des Députés, 19 December 1938; AD Papiers Rochat 19, 'Contacts Franco-Italiens avant et après l'échange des notes des 17 et 26 novembre 1938'.

[21] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, 'La mission Baudouin à Rome', in Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and Enrico Serra (eds.), *Italia e Francia (1939–1945)* vol. 1 (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1984), pp. 358–64.

[22] François-Poncet, *Au Palais Farnèse*, p. 99.

[23] Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming*, p. 255.

[24] Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 49.

[25] Strang, *On the Fiery March*, pp. 213–4.

seeking to engage in negotiations with the Italians and offering to make concessions, France appeared weak and risked 'being eaten like an artichoke, leaf by leaf'.[26]

Over the next few months, however, officials engaged in a variety of initiatives that not only revealed their growing desperation but also their lack of understanding of Mussolini's position. Attempts to prize Mussolini away from Hitler by emphasising the cultural connections between France and Italy underestimated his ideological affinities with the German dictator. Efforts to exploit internal divisions within the Italian government and army over closer relations with Germany had no success either.[27] A seemingly more promising avenue of rapprochement developed from economic talks after Italy honoured its commitment to non-belligerence following the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. Within just a few days, the French and Italian governments signed a secret economic accord by which Rome agreed to provide France with explosives, anti-tank mines and aircraft, in return for benefiting from a favourable exchange rate and French stock market prices. With Ciano requesting that the talks be conducted 'without the knowledge of the Germans', the accords gave French officials hope that Italian non-belligerence might yet be transformed into neutrality.[28] In reality, however, the fact that Italy continued to export material to France as late as 24 May 1940 was no indication of its military and diplomatic orientation.

While the French government and the Quai d'Orsay blundered from one failed diplomatic initiative to the next, it fell to François-Poncet to articulate a more nuanced understanding of the Italian position and of the impact of the French démarches. In a telegram to the Quai d'Orsay in early November 1939, he warned that Italian non-belligerence weighed heavily upon Mussolini as a humiliation for a regime ideologically geared towards war.[29] In late March 1940, François-Poncet warned that Mussolini was moving ever more decisively towards Hitler. Citing senior Italian diplomatic sources, he warned that Mussolini might seek to use negotiations as a pretence for humiliating France.[30] Any attempt to win Mussolini over with concessions would potentially provide him with an opportunity to claim offence that he would seek to exploit as an affront

[26] AD Papiers Rochat 19, Telegram from François-Poncet, 16 February 1939.
[27] Shorrock, *From Ally to Enemy*, p. 273.
[28] Georges Bonnet, *Défense de la paix. Fin d'une Europe* (Genève: Editions du Cheval Ailé, 1948), p. 382.
[29] AD Papiers Rochat 19, Telegram from François-Poncet, 6 November 1939.
[30] AD Papiers Rochat 23, Telegram from François-Poncet, 29 March 1940; AD Papiers Rochat 19, Telegram from François-Poncet, 8 April 1940.

to Italian honour.[31] Diplomats, therefore, needed to tread a careful line; while an Italian public hostile to war and to Nazi Germany represented a significant asset for the French, it could not be taken for granted. Officials must, François-Poncet cautioned, avoid creating any controversy or threat that might allow Mussolini to rally public opinion against France. Above all, they needed to avoid Italian actions inciting them to respond in such a way that Rome could claim was an act of provocation.[32]

As Daladier's administration was replaced by that of Paul Reynaud on 21 March 1940, French policy towards Italy continued to be characterised by inconsistency and indecision. One strand of opinion within the government held that Rome should be presented with an ultimatum and compelled to declare its position.[33] The second, dominated by proponents of appeasement, maintained that the French government should seek to purchase Italian neutrality by ceding territories. The third proposed to encourage Italian neutrality by dispatching an established Italophile from the French political elites to deal with the Fascist government.[34] The German invasion of France on 13 May 1940 sharply heightened the prospects of Italian entry into the war. Appointed foreign minister five days later, Daladier panicked. Adopting a dual approach, he offered Rome concessions while insisting that Italy's best interests lay with France, rather than Germany.

The eleventh hour appeals to Italy served only to strengthen Mussolini's resolve in maintaining his allegiance with Germany. Officials warned Daladier that offering concessions to the Italian government when Mussolini had already decided to join the war on Germany's side risked damaging French credibility, but to no avail.[35] Ill-judged French démarches sought to convince the Italians that German domination would threaten the European balance.[36] Such approaches failed to realise that Mussolini preferred to align with a powerful ideological ally rather than a weakened ideological foe and that his foreign policy sought precisely to destroy the old balance.[37] As Belgium capitulated and the Dunkirk evacuation of British and French forces began, late on 27 May 1940 Daladier suggested making a

[31] Attitude of Italy, 8 April 1940, DDF 1940, vol. I, p. 410.
[32] AD Papiers Rochat 23, Telegram from François-Poncet, 2 May 1940.
[33] Pierre-Etienne Flandin, *Politique Française 1919–1940* (Paris: Editions Nouvelles, 1947), pp. 356–7.
[34] Duroselle, *L'Abîme*, p. 17.
[35] AD Papiers Charles-Roux 1, Note, 29 May 1940.
[36] Guariglia to Ciano, 18 May 1940, DDI, IX, vol. 4, p. 378; Guariglia to Ciano, 30 May 1940, DDI, IX, vol. 4, p. 499; TNA FO 371/24310, 'Possible Offer of Separate Peace with Italy', 24 May 1940.
[37] Knox, *Common Destiny*, p. 142.

secret offer to Mussolini, including the cession of the French Somali coast and concessions on the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway, revisions to the Libyan border and a French–Italian condominium in Tunisia.[38] Having opposed making concessions when the country had been in a position of relative strength in 1938 and 1939, Daladier's strategy of offering concessions when France was at its most vulnerable at once robbed the government of its negotiating position and reinforced Italian suspicions. In a final attempt to break the impasse, on 8 June, Reynaud invited the Italian ambassador to the Quai d'Orsay. Guariglia merely responded by reaffirming his government's commitment to the Axis. At a time when German victories were on the verge of overturning the old democracies to create a new European order, there was little incentive for the Fascist government to side with the French Republic.[39]

German military success provided Mussolini with the opportunity he sought to launch a parallel war that would enable Italian forces to move into North Africa and the Balkans and so even out the balance of power within the Axis.[40] Upon witnessing the rapid collapse of the French army, despite not being militarily prepared to engage in conflict, on 10 June 1940, Mussolini declared war on France and Britain.[41] While it came as little surprise, it was widely seen as cynical opportunism. Even Hitler condemned it as the 'worst declaration of war in this world'.[42] The weak performance of the Italian army against French forces in the Alps only added insult to injury. Having taken over as the new head of the French government, with Italian forces still not ready for action, on 17 June, Pétain declared that he wished to enter negotiations for an armistice. Hitler informed Mussolini that not having contributed towards the campaign, Italy would not be able to participate in the negotiations as a victor. Against the opposition of Badoglio, General Graziani and Ciano, Mussolini ordered his forces to launch an immediate offensive in the Alps.[43] In three days of fighting

[38] François Charles-Roux, *Cinq mois tragiques aux affaires étrangères, 21 mai-1er novembre* 1940 (Paris: Plon, 1949), pp. 8–11.

[39] Guariglia to Ciano, 8 June 1940, DDI, IX, vol. 4, pp. 605–6.

[40] John Gooch, 'Mussolini's Strategy, 1939–1943', in John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, vol. I, *Fighting the War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 137.

[41] On the French defeat, see Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Philip G. Nord, *France 1940: Defending the Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[42] Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of a Fascist Alliance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 184.

[43] Ray Moseley, *Mussolini's Shadow: The Double Life of Count Galeazzo Ciano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 107.

between 21 and 24 June, 300,000 Italian soldiers vastly outnumbered the fewer than 100,000 French forces that confronted them. Having the advantage of fighting a defensive campaign and spurred on by their anger at the Italian 'stab in the back', French soldiers mounted a stiff resistance. By the time the fighting had ended, Italian soldiers had only reached as far as the town of Menton in the south and had fared even worse in the north, advancing only four kilometres into French territory.[44]

Armistice Negotiations

The armistice negotiations that followed the French ceasefire with Germany brought the weakness of the Italian position into sharp relief. The timing had caught Mussolini by surprise, coming only seven days after the Italian declaration of war and before Italian forces had even begun their campaign.[45] He had an ambitious set of demands, including the demobilisation of the French army and the occupation of south-eastern France, Corsica, Tunisia, French Somaliland and other strategic areas, as well as factories and military bases in France and the French colonial empire. He also sought possession over the French naval fleet, aircraft and rail rolling stock.[46] Yet when it came to the final deal, Mussolini had to scale down his demands significantly. Hitler made it clear that he planned to impose less stringent terms. Meeting in Munich on 18 June, German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop told Ciano that his government wanted to avoid pushing the French too hard in case they decided to hand the fleet over to Britain.[47] News of General de Gaulle's call to resistance on BBC radio that same day also raised fears that the French government might flee to North Africa to continue the fight.[48] Having contributed little to the French defeat, Mussolini, therefore, had to postpone his claims in the hope that the war would soon be over and that he would secure them in the final peace agreement.

From the start of the negotiations on 21 June, the French government maintained that it did not accept Italian claims of victory and would, therefore, not countenance any illegitimate Italian demands.[49]

[44] Sica, *Mussolini's Army*, pp. 23–4.
[45] Galeazzo Ciano, *Diary, 1937–1943 Complete and Unabridged* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), p. 363.
[46] Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, p. 25.
[47] Ciano, *Diary*, p. 363.
[48] Burgwyn, *Mussolini Warlord*, p. 16; Ciano, *Diary*, p. 363.
[49] Henri Michel, 'Les relations franco-italiennes (de l'armistice de juin 1940 à l'armistice de septembre 1943)', in Henri Michel (ed.), *La guerre en méditerranée 1939–1945. Actes du colloque international tenu à Paris du 8 au 11 avril 1969* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1971), pp. 487, 491.

By contrast, while it viewed the German terms as harsh, the French government accepted them as the unfortunate but justified consequence of an overwhelming military defeat. Unaware of the Italian demands and fearing the worst, General Huntziger told the German armistice delegation at Rethondes that France would not allow itself to be 'dishonoured' by punitive Italian conditions because 'although Italy had declared war on France, she had not waged war on France'.[50] If the Italians attempted to impose 'merciless' terms, the French government would walk away from the negotiations and France would resume the fight. Its army might be crushed still further by German forces, but it remained a viable military power with its navy and air force intact.[51] Indeed, France would rather face the threat of a further German assault and more onerous peace terms, Huntziger maintained, because 'honour was of greater importance than life'.[52]

For some historians, including Romain Rainero and Robert Paxton, the approach taken by Huntziger during the armistice negotiations saw the Germans being complicit in a French strategy of seeking to gain an advantage over the Italians.[53] Indeed, they suggest that Huntziger came away from Rethondes convinced that General Keitel shared his and the French government's 'contempt' towards the illegitimacy of any Italian claims.[54] As evidence of Huntziger's strategy of treating the German government as a future 'privileged interlocutor', and of German collusion, Rainero draws on a German document that quoted Huntziger apologising for his intemperate comments about Italy, but stating that he believed that the German delegates shared his opinion about the Italians. The fact that Keitel articulated his respect for Huntziger's conduct during the negotiations is interpreted by Rainero as further evidence of German complicity.[55]

French records of the incident present a somewhat different picture. Huntziger's claim that the German delegation shared his view of the Italians was not, as Rainero claims, made to German officials, but was

[50] Record of second day's negotiations at Compiègne, 22 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, p. 668; Report, first day at Rethondes, 21 June 1940, DDF 1940, *Les armistices*, p. 90.

[51] AD Papiers Baudouin 1, 'Conseil des Ministres, 22 juin 1h30 du matin – Commentaire aux réponses allemandes'.

[52] Armistice negotiations at Compiègne, 21–22 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, p. 646; Record of second day's negotiations at Compiègne, 22 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, p. 668.

[53] Rainero, *La commission italienne*, p. 30.

[54] Robert O. Paxton, *Parades and Politics at Vichy: The French Officer Corps under Marshal Pétain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 108; Pierre-François Queuille, *Histoire diplomatique de Vichy. Pétain diplomate* (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1976), p. 34.

[55] Rainero, *La commission italienne*, pp. 30–1.

rather made in a telephone conversation with General Weygand on the evening of 21 June. According to the German transcript of the secretly monitored conversation, Huntziger claimed that 'although outwardly the Germans had not shown the slightest reaction' to his comments about Italy, he 'had the impression that they shared the French opinion of the Italians'.[56] Understood in the context of a conversation with Weygand, Huntziger's remark was merely a personal observation. The French strategy at Rethondes was not an improvised attempt to capitalise upon a shared contempt for Italian claims of victory but was rather a planned effort to persuade the Germans to soften the Italian terms. Nor were Huntziger's words an emotional outburst. Rather they had been prepared beforehand by the French diplomat Léon Noël in accordance with the instructions of the French government.[57] Officials had mistakenly believed that the German delegation would shape the Italian terms. Expecting to be confronted with demands for a significant Italian occupation zone and parts of France's colonial empire, they, therefore, made a calculated plea that cited Hitler's desire for a 'just' peace and appealed to notions of military honour.[58] The failure of the German delegation to react to Huntziger's comments was merely a measure of their limited jurisdiction and ignorance of the Italian terms.[59] It was only after the negotiations had finished that Keitel expressed his personal feelings. With tears in his eyes, he shook Huntziger's hand and declared his 'profound esteem' and 'sympathy as a soldier'.[60] The French strategy of playing the Germans against the Italians, therefore, did not begin at Rethondes. The episode did, however, hint at the delusion that was to become characteristic of French attempts to divide the Axis powers.

If the negotiations at Rethondes sealed the overwhelming domination of Germany over France that was to shape relations between the two countries for the rest of the war, the negotiations with Italy inaugurated an ambiguous relationship that was also to endure for the rest of the conflict. Because the two armistices were tied together, the French

[56] Record of a telephone conversation between Huntziger and Weygand at Compiègne, 21 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, p. 654.

[57] *Le Diktat de Rethondes et l'Armistice Franco-Italien de juin 1940* (Paris: Flammarion, 1954), p. 77; Plenary meeting at Rethondes 22 June at 10 am, DDF 1940: *Les armistices*, p. 111. Paul Baudouin, *Neuf mois au gouvernement avril-décembre 1940* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1948), p. 202.

[58] Armistice negotiations at Compiègne, 21–22 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, pp. 646–7.

[59] Plenary meeting at Rethondes, 22 June, 10 am, DDF 1940: *Les armistices de juin 1940*, pp. 111–2; Record of second day's negotiations at Compiègne, 22 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, p. 669; Memorandum by Weizsäcker, 22 June 1940, DGFP, ser. D, vol. IX, p. 679.

[60] Final exchanges after signature of armistice, 22 June 1940, DDF 1940: *Les armistices*, p. 122.

government was under pressure to approve the Italian terms as quickly as possible. On being presented with the draft Italian armistice on arriving at the Villa Incisa near Rome on 24 June, however, the French delegation were relieved to find that the demands were much less onerous than they had feared.[61] The tone of the negotiations with the Italians was, therefore, markedly more conciliatory than it had been with the Germans. Indeed, one observer noted that the atmosphere verged on being rather more cordial than befitted such sombre circumstances.[62] Marshal Badoglio, who recalled the camaraderie he had shared with French soldiers during the First World War, declared to French officials that he hoped that France would soon recover, because it was a 'great nation' with a 'great history'.[63] Several of the delegates made no secret of how they held each other in high esteem. Badoglio stated that he considered General Parisot a 'friend', having become acquainted with him during his days as French military attaché to Rome.[64] Indeed, Ciano suspected that the two men had probably shared their disdain towards Germany in the past.[65] For his part, Ciano also displayed signs of friendship, spontaneously shaking hands with Huntziger and exchanging pleasantries with Noël, whom he had known for many years.[66] The atmosphere was due in part to French relief at the conditions and Italian embarrassment at the circumstances of their meeting. However, there was also undoubtedly a sense from each side that despite being wartime enemies, their interlocutors were not so different from them. After the years of political, diplomatic and military tensions that had led up to the war, the face-to-face meeting was a reminder of the cultural affinities between the two nations.

The Italian armistice comprised many demands that paralleled those imposed by Germany. The terms included disarming French troops in France, Africa and Syria, demilitarising naval bases and fortifications, surrendering weapons, disarming the fleet, agreeing that the French government would not engage in any activities harmful to Italy and liberating Italian prisoners of war. Crucially, however, what made the armistice palatable was that unlike Germany, Italy would have only a very small zone of occupation, comprising around 841 square kilometres around Menton and

[61] Charles-Roux, *Cinq mois tragiques*, p. 101; Baudouin, *Neuf mois*, p. 209.
[62] Baudouin, *Neuf mois*, p. 208.
[63] AN AJ41 5, 'Convention d'Armistice avec l'Italie – Négociations et Textes'.
[64] Pietro Badoglio, *Italy in the Second World War: Memories and Documents*, trans. Muriel Currey (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 23.
[65] Ciano, *Diary*, p. 365.
[66] *Le Diktat*, p. 95; Albert Kammerer, *La vérité sur l'armistice: Ephéméride de ce qui s'est réellement passé au moment du désastre* (Paris: Editions Medicis, 1944), p. 326.

the mountains of Savoie and would receive no occupation indemnities.[67] Significantly, whereas 'collaboration' between French administrative services and German military authorities was written into Article 3 of the German armistice, with Italy claiming no occupation rights, no equivalent condition was written into the Italian armistice.[68]

Most of the twenty-six articles of the Italian armistice were agreed upon between the two parties with little or no modification. Any areas of contention were quickly resolved with Italian concessions. On Article 9, the French government opposed demands for the demobilisation and disarmament of their forces in North Africa, Syria and the coast of French Somaliland, insisting that it would be damaging to French rule and dishonourable for an army that had not seen action.[69] Badoglio accepted an amendment stipulating that the Italian authorities would take into account the problems of maintaining order and French colonial authority.[70] French negotiators also managed to secure concessions on Article 21, which stated that all Italian prisoners in France must be immediately freed and handed over to the Italian authorities and that the Italian government had the right to demand the return of all Italian citizens residing in France. A similar clause had initially been included in the German armistice, but following French protests of an affront to the traditions of the rights of asylum, German negotiators had agreed to modify it so that it would only apply to those who had sought to incite war against Germany or committed political acts against it.[71] What made the demand so significant in the Italian case was that it would potentially have affected around 900,000 Italian citizens living in France, including the anti-Fascist refugees who had fled Italy during the 1930s. Once again, Badoglio sympathised with French concerns, claiming later that he considered the clause 'such an ignominious condition' that he 'did not hesitate for a moment' in amending it to relate solely to Italian prisoners of war and Italians imprisoned for political or military reasons.[72]

Despite the relatively moderate terms, not all of France's political and military leaders welcomed the notion of an armistice with Italy. Just as there had been those who opposed the armistice with Germany, anger at

[67] The armistice between France and Italy is reprinted in Rainero, *La commission italienne*, pp. 378–82.
[68] Franco-German Armistice of 22 June 1940, DDF 1940: *Les armistices*, p. 124.
[69] AN AJ41 5, 'Réponse du Gouvernement Français', Rome 24 June 1940, 11.30 am.
[70] AN AJ41 5, Plenary meeting at Villa Incisa, 24 June 1940, 3.40 pm.
[71] German responses to French proposals, Council of Ministers 2 pm 22 June, DDF 1940: *Les armistices*, p. 114.
[72] Badoglio, *Italy in the Second World War*, p. 23; AN AJ41 5, Telegram from Huntziger to Weygand, 24 June 1940 between 5.30 pm and 7.10 pm.

the nature of Mussolini's declaration of war spurred many senior military figures to want to continue to fight against Italy, including General Weygand, General Noguès, Admiral Esteva and General Legentilhomme.[73] Facing the Italians in North Africa, Noguès was among the most reluctant to agree to an armistice. Admiral Esteva, the commander of the French fleet at Bizerte, also wanted to continue, wiring the French government on 23 June to say that the navy would not accept any cessions to Italy. As French forces stood firm against the Italian invasion through the Alps, naval commanders seized the opportunity to gain some retribution against Italy while they still had the chance. News of the French aerial bombardment of Trapani and Livorno afforded the French armistice delegation some small gratification during the negotiations.[74] By 27 June, however, only General Legentilhomme in French Somaliland was prepared to continue the fight and take on Italian forces in Italian Somalia and Abyssinia.[75] By the time the French government moved to Vichy on 1 July, the stage was set for a new regime and domestic and foreign policy alignment with the Axis.

Conclusion

While there was nothing inevitable about Mussolini's decision to declare war, French actions only helped reinforce his position. Behind the various French approaches lay an assumption that once Mussolini realised the true character of Hitler's ambitions and their consequences for Italy, he would abandon ties with Germany and turn to France.[76] Ministers and officials wholly underestimated the significance of ideology as a determining factor in Italian foreign policy. They failed to appreciate how Mussolini's expansionist ambitions strengthened his dependency on Germany.[77] French attempts to prize Rome away from Berlin by warning of the dangers of German domination and by appealing to notions of shared heritage, therefore, held little sway with Mussolini. Deeply mistrustful of the French government's intentions and feeling betrayed by its actions over Abyssinia, Mussolini was determined to exploit the fall of France to its full. The relatively benign terms of the Villa Incisa armistice were, therefore, at odds with Mussolini's ambitions towards France and sent misleading signals about Italian intentions.

[73] Paxton, *Parades and Politics*, pp. 25–9; AD 9GMII 185, Telegram from Noguès, 18 June 1940.
[74] Amiral Auphan and Jacques Mordal, *La marine française dans la seconde guerre mondiale* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1976), pp. 167–8.
[75] Paxton, *Parades and Politics*, pp. 25–9.
[76] Shorrock, *From Ally to Enemy*, pp. 282–3.
[77] Costa Bona, *Dalla guerra alla pace*, p. 14.

Italy's military weakness was its Achilles' heel from the outset. In tacitly recognising this by restricting Italian entitlement to exercise power over France, the armistice terms gave the French government both the fuel and the scope for manoeuvre. The negotiations of 20–24 June 1940, therefore, sowed the seeds of a future French strategy of seeking to play the Germans off against the Italians, but it also marked the start of a French delusion about how much could be achieved from trying to divide the Axis.